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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the experience of a Basic Speech teacher with college-age Choctaw Indian students enrolled in a combination college and vocational training program. In the process of teaching basic speech techniques, the teacher learned a valuable lesson in Choctaw cultural patterns. Time concepts; social etiquette such as name-giving, criticism, and eye contact; and the idea of group activity as opposed to personal competition had to be dealt with in terms of differing Anglo and Choctaw norms; and adjustments were made on both sides. Choctaw humor was also discovered. The greatest lessons learned, however, were a respect for the Choctaws' tolerance, refusal to make anyone feel ill at ease, and determination to respond to the Anglo world in terms of their own culture. (AM)

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# TEACHER AS LEARNER: A YEAR WITH THE MISSISSIPPI CHOCTAW INDIANS

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My primary philosophy in teaching is that of John Dewey, we learn by doing. This would apply as well for first graders, as college seniors.

As first a teacher of loquacious Third Grade school children, later as an English teacher for a most outspoken group of 110 Black high school students, I became used to a verbal classroom setting. Later having three full semesters working with competitive oriented college students I came ill prepared to work in communication with Choctaw college students of speech, who were primarily non-verbal. For not only was I but some 250 pupils of mine had more or less been incessant talkers quick to speak to fill any void and quicker to speak when a teacher's reaction might be a favorable nod of approval or better a favorable grade.

Such was not the case on the Choctaw reservation where I became desperate for a response of any fashion, a favorable nod, attentive eyeball contact let alone verbal approval.

But let me explain the circumstances surrounding this task of teaching the basic speech class to these college students and then relate to you my total confusion, botches and gropings, compromise then relative success in what might be labeled more of a learning situation for teacher than student.

In mid December 1972, I was hired by the Choctaw Tribal Vice Chairman, to be the instructor-counselor for a New Careers program which provided two years of college course work and on-the-job training to thirty Choctaw Indian college students preparing them for the world of work. Basically these students were to take three college courses a semester, receive three hours of tutoring in their college course work from me and work in a Bureau of Indian Affairs or Tribal Government position for the remaining 28 hours of their forty hour week. I accepted this job but found myself with nothing to do pending negotiation of the final contract. Thus, for almost two months I had no one to instruct, no one to counsel. I was without a client. However, either my Anglo-Saxon background or an old Army slogan, saved me. "When you have nothing to do on a job--do something!" So I prepared lectures--speech course lectures. I was informed that the students would have the required speech course first semester and I would be teaching some if not all of them in the basic speech class. I wrote lectures on how to avoid nervousness, how to organize a speech, techniques on speech delivery, how to use the motivated sequence, ad infinitum. And so it happened that when I held my first speech class for eight Choctaw New Careers students, eight Choctaw teacher aids working with the Choctaw Adult Basic Education program plus one Souix housewife, one Cuban nurses' aid, and one Choctaw legal aid, I was a walking arsenal of structured speech and communication information. I had prepared lectures which would last until mid-term and had twenty handouts to accompany them. In addition, I had spent at least three hours of orientation with the eight New Careers students in my class and knew almost every student by name. I was not just some unknown walk-in teacher. I was prepared. This would be fun for all of us.

It is significant that I lost my first lecture. Much of those first three hours is forgotten. What I do recall I now know was all wrong.

To begin with class started late. Few Choctaws carry watches and fewer Choctaws check time closely and the time pattern for a school that rang no bell was apparently interpreted as the same time pattern for Choctaw social events: that is you come on time but start late. In essence, Choctaws gather outside and socialize until there are indications that something is going on inside and then everyone moves in at their own pace. Clock watcher that I am, I waited at least five minutes, then went outside and announced that it was past time to begin class. I in no way here mean to indicate that Choctaw Indians attempt to or deliberately avoid being "on time." It is just that their concept of time is not Anglo. Adherence to specific times works both ways. As they do not watch the time to begin neither do they watch the time to end. Time for Choctaw Indians is task oriented not minute oriented. They will stay until the job is done and not infrequently did class continue after the dismissal time.

So there we were at 2:10 ready to begin. I checked roll, yes, all were there, all at that time. I calmed down utilizing the technique of deep breathing to avoid nervousness, in this case, anger, and began with the beginning; that we would be together for a semester and could enjoy each other's company more if we partook of some interpersonal communication. I instructed them that we were to take a partner and learn the other students' names and at least two facts about everyone in the room, to be used later for introductory speech purposes.

But I had not watched the seating patterns in the class. The eight New Careers students were all women, primarily shy, retiring, women who sat in two columns of four on my left. The eight ABE teacher aides sat in two columns on my far right, six of them in the row next to the window on the outside and two in the inside column toward the front. The three peripheral students who did not work together, the Choctaw legal aid, the Cuban nurses' aid and the Souix housewife sat dispersed and isolated though nearer the ABE teacher aids. As for myself, I sat or alternately leaned back upon the large teacher's desk facing the students.

You might have guessed there were constituted four pairs of New Careers women, four pairs of Tribal Adult Education teacher aides--two male and two female, and a Souix and Cuban pair of women and the male Choctaw legal aid and myself. I allowed plenty of time for this exercise and tried to enccurage as much interchange as possible, but once the New Careers women had talked to everyone they knew, that being the other six women in their program, they sat down and would not budge. The same occurred with the teacher aides though one or two of them made some effort at speaking to the four of us who were peripheral. These eight Choctaw teacher aides most of whom had been teaching for over a year were somewhat more outspoken and out going than the eleven others. What I should have noticed before this exchange was that the seating patterns indicated a social grouping of each clique staying with its own. What I didnot know until later was that Choctaws do not give their names openly to strangers. Most often if you ask a Choctaw person their name they ignore you. Name asking is not expected behavior and to find out someone's name you ask a friend. Additionally, Choctaw women do not approach a man unless they are working together or unless he is a relative. Many of the persons in the class were neither related nor working together. No one told me these things.I had to find them out on my own. For above all these students would not exhibit bad Choctaw manners toward me. And

their worst breach of etiquette would be to tell me either what to do or such is so. Choctaws in general do not tell others what to do. Even in my New Careers job for the Tribal Vice Chairman I was never told what to do. I was informed of needs and given a thorough job description. But never was I told do this or do that. Only rarely was I asked.

This is a pervasive cultural pattern for I have never heard a Choctaw parent tell a child what to do. The pattern of the Choctaw people in meeting needs is beautiful. Needs are noticed or mentioned, and they are met. One evening my husband was driving in the country with a Choctaw man. They met a third man, a Choctaw, in another car at a crossroads and they all grouped together outside to talk. No words were exchanged about the winter cold yet as soon as the shirt sleeved Choctaw shivered, the other gave him his jacket.

The social pattern that jarred me deepest and affected me personally the most both inside of the classroom and out was the lack of eyeball contact between persons when speaking. First speeches took place on our second class day. Speaker after speaker, looked over our heads, in the corner, at the ceiling, at their hands, in one or more of these places but never at us, the audience. As a past teacher of speech I had encountered a speaker on occasion who would not look at his audience. But there was always improvement when I pointed out lack of eye contact as something to be overcome. But for Choctaw students lack of eye contact was expected behavior. In Choctaw etiquette it is bad manners to stare at someone while talking to them. A glimpse is allowable but one doesn't engage another's eyes during a conversation. But this bit of information, like most other bits of helpful information, I never learned in the classroom. In class I would tell the students to look at one another when they spoke and many times asked why they didn't look at one another when they spoke and I never got an answer. Only silence. About a month later during a tutoring session a New Careers student quietly told me in answer to a further probe about the use of eyeball contact in conversing and why it is not used more, "We just don't."

I would like to add at this point that a Choctaw female student and friend of mine who took the basic speech course from one of my colleagues at Mississippi State this fall had the same problem. In answer to my question as to how the course was going she said not very well. "I got a C on my last speech because I don't look at everybody enough and I don't use gestures." I said have you seen your instructor outside of class and mentioned to her that these are cultural patterns and the way you do things. Her answer was, "No she's in communication, I shouldn't have to explain."

If at this point you are tired of hearing about lack of eyeball contact let me remind you what this meant to me as an Anglo communicator. First of all, it meant that with me as speaker, nobody was listening since nobody was looking at me. And as a lecturer teacher I couldn't stand it. I felt like a non-person.

Working with a population of this type demanded compromise both for me as a teacher and for the students as learners for we needed to share communication understandings. I literally threw away what I described as lectures and got pragmatic. I explained that since they as future tribal leaders would be moving in two worlds both Anglo and Indian they must understand that to avoid the eyes of

an Anglo was a deference pattern not a token of respect as in the Choctaw world. And that to avoid an Anglo's eyes was in essence giving up equal status and rendering oneself subordinate. And whereas before all my telling them to use eyeball contact did not work this explanation apparently made sense, especially for the men, and fully fifty percent of the students improved in this area once this pragmatic statement of fact was made.

Another adjustment quickly made by me was in the area of impromptu speeches and we did many of them. One type I used which worked was "bale out your buddy." In this, the speaker had the obligation to speak until another took the obligation for him. I have tried this technique in Anglo classes where it would not work since another would not assume the obligation to speak leaving one speaker holding the bag so to speak. This technique worked especially well among Choctaw students who are accustomed to working toward a group goal.

Earlier I mentioned the shy, retiring nurses' aides. I did not come to realize until writing this paper the perhaps key reason for their initial and prolonged silence in the classroom. I found out from the Anglo Director of Nursing at the Indian hospital where these eight women worked. With pride she pointed out to me that the Nurses' Aide Trainees were not allowed to speak their native tongue, Choctaw, at the hospital. The only language allowed was English. This was of course for the girls' benefit since they needed the practice of using English, the necessary language of a hospital. Thus, they were not allowed to address even their older or younger friends and patients who spoke nothing but Choctaw without breaking the rules set down by their supervisor.

Couple this attitude and restriction toward their language with twelve years of the same attitude and restriction in Bureau of Indian Affairs schools, where the rules were the same, no Choctaw speech in the classroom, and it is understandable why these students were shy and retiring in an Anglo structured setting. Yet get them out of the structured setting of work and school and I found them loquacious not only with Choctaws but also with Anglos they trust.

The few days when we held our classes away from Bureau of Indain Affairs property I could sense the atmosphere change. When we were away from the Bureau of Indian Affairs classrooms where most of them went to school there was continual smiles and jabbering in Choctaw between speeches.

I had special difficulty regarding the lack of criticism of class speeches. These students refused to critique speeches since to criticise was to use bad manners. It was not Choctaw. Some of their example rubbed off on me, I criticized less.

Besides limiting critiquing I altered another pattern. I knew from experience Choctaws would not compete as individuals against each other for grades. Since they wouldn't compete against each other as individuals I set them rules for achieving and competing against a score card. For all speeches they had strict time limits to adhere to. Deviating in any direction 45 seconds cost them a letter grade for that portion of grade relating to time deviated. Things such as 5 eyeball contacts, a C; ten eyeball contacts, a B; 15, an A made sense to them as a workable solution to acquiring a grade. Gestures,- 3 different, a B,

6 different an A, again was a scale they could deal with. As internals for the speech, I would deal with counting arguments pro or con or of counting types of verbal supporting materials. Of course, there remained a subjective evaluation on my part but fully 40-50% of the speech grade dealt with externals of self discipline and prior planning that could be literally counted on. This I felt made my grading fairer if not easier. And more important a system was established which they understood and accepted as fair rules of the game.

What has not come out clearly in this paper is the individual differences of students, the Indian aspect of politeness, the more traditional forms of humor, the tall tale and practical jokes or the aftermath role of one class member who was elected to the tribal council the summer after our class together.

There were, of course, individual differences in students, one young man was so talented verbally, as is his uncle who is Tribal Chairman, that his final and flawless political speech supporting Choctaw determination was given without notes. It was a statement of his total committment to Choctaw self-government.

A vivid incident occurred the last day of class. The first day of class I assigned the students a project to select and deliver a three to five minute speech they liked, to present on the final day of class. One of the male students found a speech delivered by one of the departing Choctaw chiefs heading toward Oklahoma during the first Indian removal. Within a week, this student excitedly and informally showed me a typed copy of this speech since he was proud of it and of having found it in some remote source. Yet several weeks later, on the last day of class when he was to deliver the speech he replied, "I don't have one." I was taken back. "But," I said, "you showed me your speech the first week it was assigned." "But,I don't have one" was again his reply. I pushed further, "What happened to it?" "It's already been given." Then this ray of light filters through my mind, the same speech had indeed been given shortly before by another student. I then asked him to give a man's version of a Chief speaking to his people since the person who gave the speech prior had been a woman. This apparently pacified the male student and he went on to deliver the speech eloquently. Had I not known this student was prepared and had I not pushed him to answer me, he would indeed have gotten a zero because he was being polite. The theme of politeness reoccurs and it is closely related to the theme of don't force oneself on another person or criticize. One remains polite. Vine Deloria, a Souix Indian and author of Custer Died for Your Sins states that the degree of politeness is possessed by many Choctaws.

Also in Custer Died for Your Sins, Deloria has a chapter about Indian Humor and I owe this comment about humor to him since after reading the chapter, Indian humor among the Choctaws forged to the surface. The tradition of the tall tale or legend, as you wish, is not only Southern, it is Choctaw. A hundred years ago, Apushmataha, a Choctaw Indian Chief, described his birth as coming from an oak tree, lightning hits the oak tree in a storm, the tree totally disappears and instead of the tree sits the babe--Apushmataha with a club in his hand. Biographers believe this to be fact for Choctaws, at this the Choctaws only laugh for they know this legend to be a tall tale.

I thought I heard nothing so funny as this in class, one side splitter occurred that will bring me joy in my retirement. Remember now, these shy, retiring nurses aides of which I spoke earlier. I assigned one of them during an, "How to do an Interview" session to be a truck driver looking for a job. So placing a wad of gum solidly in her cheek, she chomped her way through the interview with her leg swinging, elbow on the desk, "naws" and "yahs" in evidence. All the way through this, her interviewer (the Choctaw who did not have his final speech to give) was quite out of sorts and totally offguard. So out of character for her I thought that all of us guffawed and hee hawed until she returned to her desk beaming. This scene was probably the healthiest thing that could have happened to us all semester, for afterwards we pretty well all relaxed. I personally shall always be thankful for it. By the way, I saw this shy one later in the summer steal the tribal chairman away from his wife in a Steal Partners dance.

The informal moments got to be the true learning situations for me. If a problem could not be solved in class normally it could be solved at class break. Thus, when I received a silent response, the frequent pattern was to take a break and discover its cause. Then to plot new strategy to get around the problem. Little problems like what roles were off limits for certain persons and why weren't such and such working together.

I could go on at length concerning what I learned as a teacher of communication in this cross-cultural communication situation. Most importantly, because I learned to know the students and their culture, I could learn from them, rather than grade them inadequate in terms of Anglo standards. As a result, I was able to respond to their previous learning and move from that to enabling them to better learn to communicate with Anglos according to established Anglo patterns of communication. In closing I wish to leave you with two paramount lessons which I feel I learned from my Choctaw students. First is a respect for their tolerance of my fumbling initial efforts and their unwillingness to make any other human being, teacher or student, feel ill at ease. Second, is their determination to remain Indian and to respond to the White world as an Indian. I only hope that I helped them present themselves better as Indians in terms Whites understand. For the white society sorely needs some of the values and attitudes these Choctaw students held so dear.